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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HANOI 001932

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: RELIGIOUS FREEDOM THRU THE LENS OF A DAK LAK VILLAGE  
REP

1. (U) This is a joint Hanoi/HCMC reporting cable.

2. (SBU) Summary: On July 25, during an otherwise tightly controlled visit to the Central Highlands (septels), the Ambassador, Emboffs, and ConGenoffs made an unscripted visit to a mostly Protestant ethnic minority M'nong village along the road from Buon Ma Thuot to Dalat. A local resident told of some continuing government efforts to limit Protestant worship, including the destruction of some churches and prohibitions on worship as a community. At the same time, the resident specifically dismissed allegations of forced renunciations, "invitations" to meet with police, and arrests, and we were able to visit one apparently active unofficial house church. End summary.

3. (SBU) Following official meetings with Dak Lak provincial authorities, Ambassador and delegation traveled by car along National Highway 27, where nearly 29,000 ethnic minority M'nong Protestants reportedly face restrictions on their ability to worship, according to HCMC-based Protestant contacts. While the police escort preferred to remain parked along the side of the main road, the Ambassador and delegation ventured for an hour down a muddy path into Buon Biap Xa Yang Tao village, Lak District, Dak Lak Province.

4. (SBU) Almost immediately after entering the village, the Ambassador encountered an ethnic M'nong Protestant and former USAID employee, who, with only some initial trepidation, agreed to escort the Ambassador on a tour of the village.

5. (SBU) The village contains approximately 1000 residents in about 100 households, often consisting of three generations under the same roof. While appearing generally poor and often dressed in worn western clothing, villagers had few real complaints about their material lives, according to our guide. Most children were now able to attend grades 1-5 in the neighborhood school, although very few made it to the provincial capital to attend high school.

6. (SBU) According to this source, police destroyed the local village "church" late last year and forbade the predominantly Christian villagers to worship any more. The police had told them the church was "illegal" and would not allow them to build a replacement. (He said that he had heard of other churches destroyed elsewhere, but made clear he had not seen this for himself. He indicated that police directed most of their attention to houses/churches that openly displayed a cross on the outside, or had a sign proclaiming the location of a church.) Worship had become "more difficult" over the past year, but people nonetheless continued to gather in small groups in their homes, he claimed. They were not allowed to worship in the community "rong" house or school, however.

7. (SBU) While police had sometimes tried to make local Christians sign documents renouncing their faith, nobody ever complied, according to our source. (Sources in HCMC had earlier confirmed that there had been fewer "invitations" from local police and fewer attempts at forced renunciations of late.) He said that he had heard of ceremonies where villagers were required to drink pig's blood to show they had renounced Christianity, but that this had not happened not in this village. Asked about restrictions on travel, he noted that most people were too poor even to contemplate leaving the village.

8. (SBU) Our contact attributed government mistrust of ethnic minority Christians in the Central Highlands to GVN officials' confusion over the term "Dega," which means simply "people of the mountains." He opined that the GVN regarded his own ethnic minority group as U.S. spies. Describing events related to the ethnic unrest of 2001, he claimed that 10 to 20 villagers had been arrested and not heard from since. Their families knew where they were held, but were not allowed to visit them, he added. No one from this village had escaped to Cambodia, and no one had come to the village encouraging them to do so, he noted. No foreign religious workers had ever come to the village, either. Even after facing repression, he said, "no one" in this village supported an autonomous state. While there were no

military units in the village on a daily basis, there was a steady police presence to keep an eye on them, he said.

9. (SBU) Our guide escorted Ambassador and delegation into an ordinary wooden home, which was unmarked from the outside but was clearly being used as a place of worship on the inside, with rows of wooden pews, an altar with a cross, one Bible (in Ede, a language related to M'nong), and hymnals. He claimed that every village had a "secret" place like this for worship. Formal services are held one Sunday a month, when a pastor comes from a neighboring village, but villagers worship in this house church or in their homes at other times. Lamenting insufficient supplies of ethnic minority language Bibles, he asked for the Ambassador's assistance in obtaining additional Bibles from the U.S. Outside another nearby house, a board displayed two lines of biblical scripture written in an ethnic minority language.

10. (SBU) Comment: While one village cannot be seen as truly representative of the complex picture of religious life in the Central Highlands, it was striking how Protestant religious life continues to flourish, despite apparent official efforts to crack down on "illegal activities." Authorities must be aware of the ongoing services, travels by pastors, existence of ethnic language Bibles, etc., but yet appear willing to turn a blind eye in this village as long as the residents do not attempt to step beyond certain bounds to "flaunt" their unregistered religious activities. Similarly, at least in this village, there appear to have been few if any consequences to individuals for declining to renounce their faith. Even the relatively tolerant official treatment of this village is somewhat offset, however, by our guide's account of house church destruction, arrests, and pervasive suspicion.

BURGHARDT